DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 268 890 HE 019 255

AUTHOR Birnbaum, Robert
TITLE Leadership and Learning: The College President as Intuitive Scientist. Presidential Address: ASHE 1986 Annual Meeting Paper.
SPONS AGENCY Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. Teachers College.
PUB DATE Feb 86
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (San Antonio, TX, February 20-23, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Administrator Responsibility; *Attribution Theory; *College Presidents; *Educational Change; Educational Quality; Expectation; Higher Education; Intuition; *Leadership; Locus of Control; *Schemata (Cognition)
IDENTIFIERS *ASHE Annual Meeting

ABSTRACT

Cognitive biases that may affect learning by college presidents and the effects of these biases on the presidency and higher education were studied. Based on a recent study of presidential judgment under uncertainty, data were obtained on the perceptions of 252 campus chief executive officers concerning institutional leadership and quality, and the sources of institutional improvement and change. Presidents indicated on a 100-point scale how effective they thought the average college president was as an institutional leader. They also rated themselves and their predecessors. Presidents assessed seven aspects of their campuses at the time they took office, estimated changes in them to date, and predicted their state at the time they will leave office. Finally, presidents identified the most important incident or change at their campus during the past year or so. It was found that presidents build schemas of effectiveness that are based on previous success in their careers and on the normative expectation that presidents have critical effects on institutional life. When they encounter new and ambiguous situations they are likely to anticipate, and therefore to observe, successful outcomes, and to attribute these to their own efforts. Presidents are also subject to errors induced by cognitive distortion. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED268890

LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING:

THE COLLEGE PRESIDENT AS INTUITIVE SCIENTIST

Presidential Address

Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education,
February 20, 1986, San Antonio, Texas

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert Birnbaum

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Robert Birnbaum
Professor of Higher Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, New York 10027

Associate Director, National Center
for Postsecondary Governance and Finance

Financial assistance to support the collection of data reported in this paper was provided by the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College, Teachers College, Columbia University.

HE 019 253

ASHE Association for the Study of Higher Education
The George Washington University/One Dupont Circle, Suite 630/Washington, D.C. 20036
(202) 296-2597

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, Texas, February 20-23, 1986. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Two years ago, President Quincy Wagstaff of Huxley College sent the Director of Admissions a letter of praise for her work. The following year he was startled to discover that admissions applications had decreased. Concerned that in a time of projected enrollment declines his decentralized management approach was no longer useful, Wagstaff held a series of meetings with the Director. After criticizing her recent performance, he suggested some changes in her operations, and mutually developed with her an MBO plan for the following twelve months. A year later, the President noted with some satisfaction that the application rate had recovered. In a later discussion of this episode with a visiting researcher, the President indicated that it had taught him that praise could decrease performance and criticism could improve it, that MBO was a useful management tool, and that direct presidential oversight of (and occasional intervention into) critical organizational activities was an effective way of exercising leadership.

The flow of organizational life is constantly punctuated by incidents such as this in which presidents appear to learn under conditions of uncertainty by comparing their predictions to actual outcomes or by evaluating the consequences of the activities of themselves or others. Will the admissions office be more effective if I delegate responsibility or if I personally keep on top of things? What will the Faculty Senate likely do if I reject a faculty promotion

recommendation? How do I know if I should I trust the president of the faculty union? Would Smith or Jones be better as the new dean, and what criteria should I use to make the choice? What will be the consequences of transferring resources from faculty salaries to programs of student retention? What necessary and sufficient actions must I take now in order to achieve a desired future state?

By confronting and acting upon questions such as these presidents come to make sense of their roles and develop ideas and beliefs about the effects of different kinds of executive activity on organizational outcomes. In other words, they learn what "works" and what does not. Learning in this context may be thought of as an inferential process through which presidents come to believe that a specific presidential action leads to a specific organizational consequence. Accurate learning should help presidents to increase their effectiveness. But suppose what they learn is sometimes inaccurate?

This paper considers the hypothesis that some presidential learning about the organizational consequences of presidential actions may be systematically biased, and that this bias may lead presidents to erroneous understandings about their own influence and about the nature of leadership. These errors may have many sources, including the often counterintuitive responses of complex and loosely-coupled social systems (Weick, 1976), the peculiar nature of academic organizations (Cohen and March, 1974; March and Olsen, 1979), and even the sequences of events that form presidential careers. This paper analyzes an additional and relatively unstudied aspect of presidential learning - the cognitive

biases that may influence the making of presidential judgments when important information is missing, when relationships between cause and effect are not clear, or when outcomes cannot be reliably predicted in advance. What affects the way presidents think as they make judgments under conditions of uncertainty?

The President as Intuitive Scientist

That presidents must make such judgments is so obvious to us that it is easy to oversimplify what is in reality an incredibly complex series of cognitive tasks. In order to learn, presidents must sample, code, store, retrieve, and arrange information that is relevant to the problem being considered. Much of this information is ambiguous, the president's capacities to process data are limited, and the amount of material that may be considered relevant is potentially infinite, so there are many opportunities for error. But even if the president manages each of these tasks with complete accuracy, significant cognitive processing remains. In order to reach valid conclusions the president must then also successsfully assess covariations, infer causality, and generate and test hypotheses. These cognitive tasks are in very important ways comparable to the activities of the formal scientist.

But presidents, like most people concerned with practical affairs, are not formal scientists. They are not likely either to have available, or to use, the structures and processes inherent in scientific inquiry that protect the formal scientist from going too far astray. Instead, presidents are intuitive scientists (Nisbett and Ross, 1980) who rely

upon their background and experience as much as upon data to reach judgments and make predictions about relationships such as cause and effect. Their intuitions are often correct, and indeed it is likely that people are selected as presidents at least in part because their judgments in the past have proven to have been correct. But presidents, and all other intuitive scientists, are also susceptible to false learning -- learning that may lead them to make erroneous inferences and judgments that may be quite resistant to alteration even in the face of strong countervailing evidence.

President Wagstaff, for example, is convinced of the validity of what he has recently "learned" about reward systems, MBO, and leadership. Because of this learning, he would probably find it increasingly difficult to consider alternative explanations that could as easily account for changes in application patterns. Both the initial decrease and the subsequent increase, for example, might be explainable by simple statistical regresssion to the mean that could have occured even in the absence of presidential involvement. Or they might both have been caused by external factors over which the president had no control. In either case, what the president thought he had learned was wrong, although he is unlikely ever to know this.

The same cognitive factors that mislead presidents may also lead to false learning on the part of those who study presidential behavior, and may cause both presidents and scholars to incorrectly assess the effects that presidents have on institutional life.

This paper examines some of the cognitive biases that may affect presidential learning and considers the effects of these biases on the presidency and on higher education. It draws its data from the responses of 252 campus chief executive officers to three sets of questions included in a recent study of presidential judgment under uncertainty.[1] These three sets of questions dealt with presidential perceptions of institutional leadership, of institutional quality, and of the sources of institutional improvement and change.

RESULTS

Evaluating Institutional Leadership

The first group of questions on leadership had three parts. Presidents were asked first to indicate on a hundred-point scale how effective they thought the average college president was as an institutional leader. The lowest possible score was 0, and the highest possible score was 100. The sample rated the average presidential effectiveness of their peers as 65.6

The second part asked the respondents to rate themselves on the same scale. The mean self rating was 77.3 Two thirds (67.3%)of the presidents rated themselves as more effective than their rating of the

1. The population included 2,148 presidents of accredited institutions enrolling at least 500 students, and identified as being in one of four categories: public two-year colleges, public four-year colleges, independent four-year colleges, and doctoral-granting universities. Stratified systematic sampling of each of these four groups developed a sample of 417 presidents, approximately equally divided between the groups. The 252 useable responses represent a response rate of 60.4 percent.

average president, 25.0 percent rated themselves as equal to the average president, and only 7.7 percent rated themselves as below average.

The third part asked respondents to rate their institutional predecessor on the same scale. The mean rating was 52.0. Three-quarters of the presidents (76.5%) rated themselves as superior to their predecessors, 17.6 percent rated themselves as equal, and only 5.9 percent believed themselves to be less effective than their predecessors.

The three ratings of the average president, responding president, and predecessor not only had different means, but two different distribution patterns as well, as shown in Figure 1. The distributions of the average president and of the responding president were quite

---

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

---

similar, the major difference being the tendency for presidents to rate themselves as above average. But the distribution of ratings given to one's predecessor was completely different, suggesting that the bases used for evaluating predecessors may be different as well.

Evaluating Institutional Quality

In the second set of items the presidents assessed seven aspects of their campuses at the time they took office, estimated changes in them

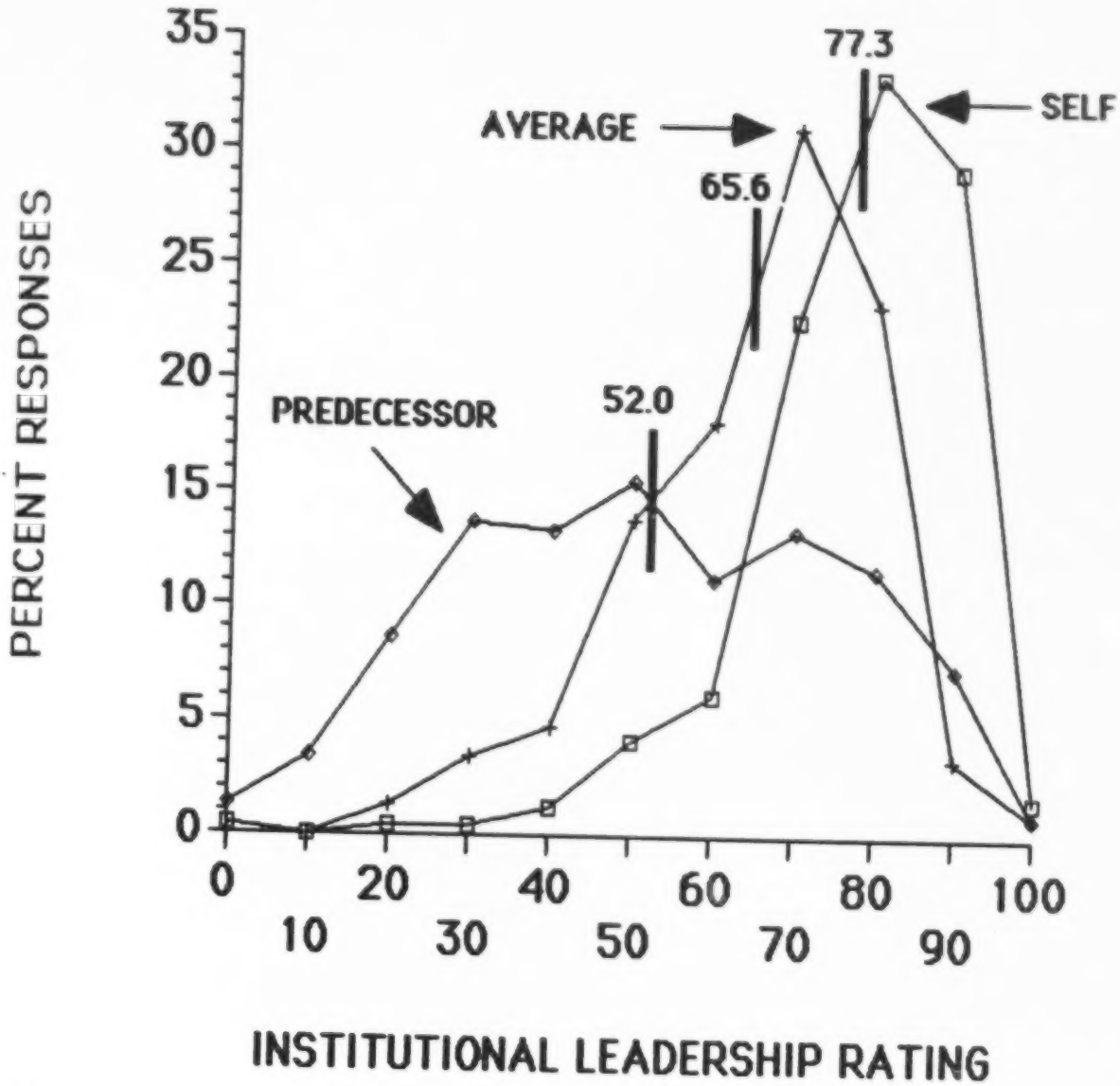

FIGURE 1

DISTRIBUTION AND MEANS OF RATINGS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF "INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP" OF AVERAGE PRESIDENT, SELF, AND PREDECESSOR BY 252 COLLEGE PRESIDENTS

to date, and predicted their state at the time they will leave office.[2] These data are shown in Figure 2. The average rating of

---

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

---

these seven factors related to campus quality at the time the presidents took office was 3.5 on a five-point scale (Excellent = 1 ... Poor = 5) which was halfway between Fair and Good, and a long way from Excellent or Very Good. Presidents also indicated on a five-point scale (Much Better = 1 ... Much Worse = 5) their perception of the degree to which seven aspects of campus quality had changed from the time they took office until the present. Their average rating of change was 2.0, or "Somewhat Better." Finally, presidents predicted changes in these dimensions at the time they would leave office. Despite the significant improvements that had already occurred, their average rating of 2.1 for each of the seven aspects predicted that things would be much better still at the time they would leave office than at present.

---

2. The seven aspects of campus functioning they were asked to evaluate were financial strength, faculty morale, campus facilities, quality of instruction, community service, quality of students, and research productivity.

CAMPUS QUALITY:

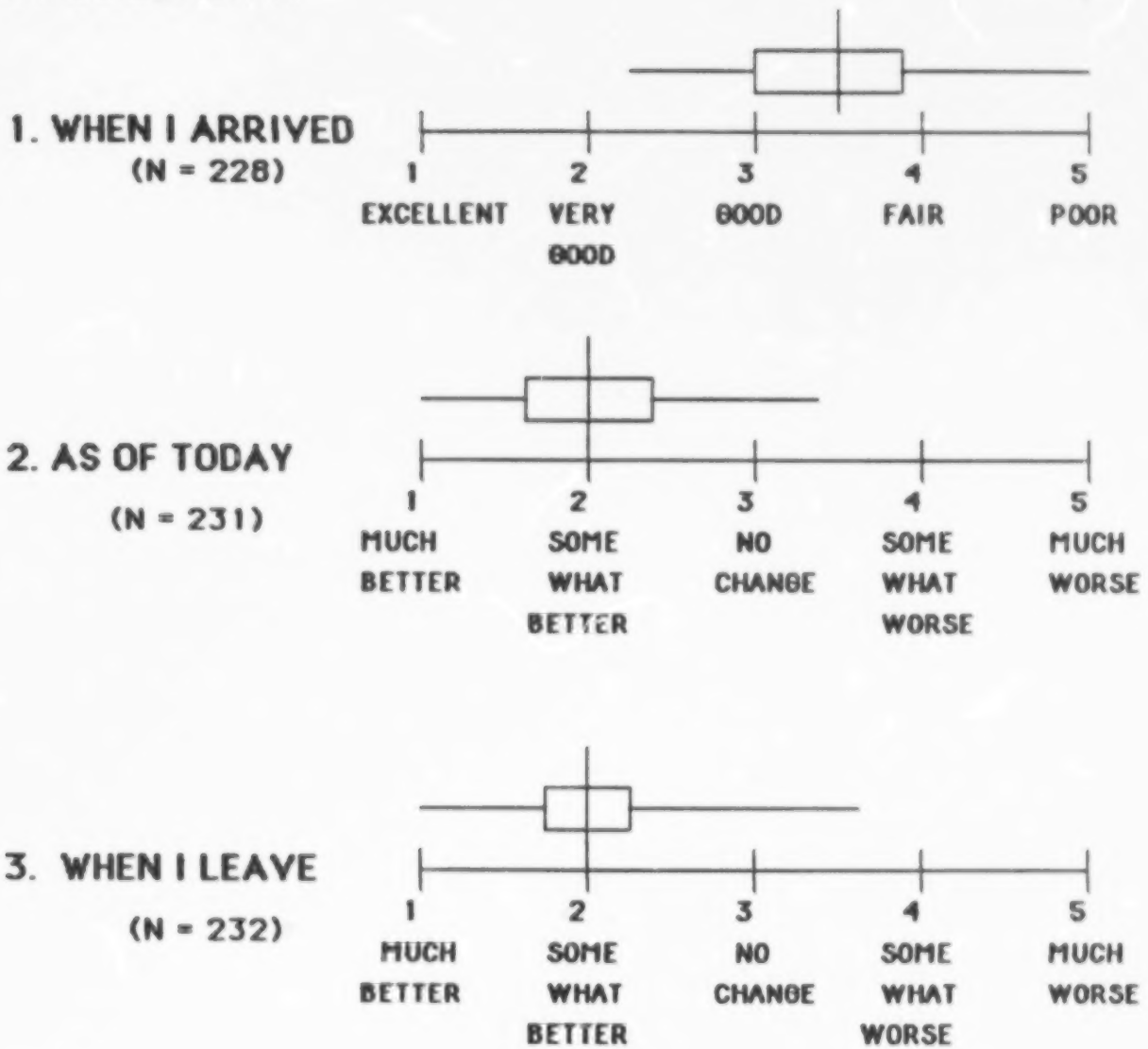

FIGURE 2.

SUMMARY ASSESSMENTS BY 252 PRESIDENTS OF CAMPUS QUALITY AT THREE TIME PERIODS, SHOWING MEAN, QUARTILE RANGES, AND TOTAL RANGE.

Of the seven factors related to campus quality, the one exhibiting the greatest reported change was "faculty morale." It is surely not a coincidence that this is the factor most likely to be subject to error on most campuses because of ambiguous definitions and lack of data. Three-quarters of the presidents (74.2 percent) characterized faculty morale in the lower two categories of either Fair or Poor at the time they took office; 84.2 percent believed it was either Much Better or Somewhat Better now, and 71.2 percent predicted that it would improve still further during their tenure. This same trend, in somewhat less dramatic form, was seen for every one of the seven items.

Leadership and Quality

These presidential leadership and campus assessment data, when looked at together, show a clear pattern of presidential perceptions that can be generalized into a simple and much repeated scenario. The scenario begins with a former institutional president who was much less effective than the average college president. No doubt as a result of the former president's weak or misguided leadership, the quality of institutional programs and services were at an unacceptable level of quality. A new president was then chosen. The new president was greatly superior to the old one, and in fact was a stronger and more effective leader by far than the average president. During the administration of the new president all programs and services improved, and considerable further improvement is promised by the time the president's term ends and a successor is named.

The scenario is consistent with our common perceptions of heroic leadership, and appears from these data to be a ubiquitous component of presidential perception. To be sure, even external observers might find this scenario to accurately represent reality in many specific situations, and anecdotal evidence abounds of conspicuous campus improvement apparently provoked by new leadership.

However, the data contain within them a fundamental logical inconsistency. Individual presidents need not confront this inconsistency, since they may believe their high self-evaluation and low predecessor evaluation to represent a unique situation. But external observers must consider the phenomenon in the aggregate rather than individually, and recognize that if the events portrayed by this reported scenario were objectively true, the average American college and university would be improving exponentially as each president was succeeded by someone who was more able. Even the most ardent friends of higher education have not claimed that this is true. Indeed, most observers would probably agree upon reflection that if this study were repeated ten years from now, it is all but certain that the presidents self-identified today as so highly effective would be judged by <u>their</u> successors as having been relatively weak.

<u>The Source of Campus Improvement</u>

The third set of items asked presidents to identify the most important episode, incident, or change at their campus during the past year or so. The item was phrased somewhat differently to presidents in four randomly selected subgroups. One subgroup of presidents was asked

to identify the most important campus incident; 66.7 percent indicated that they, as president, had initiated it and 86.7 percent indicated that its outcome was positive. A second subgroup of presidents was asked to identify the most important incident that they as president had initiated; 91.2 percent of that group indicated the results were positive. A third subgroup of presidents was asked to identify the most important incident that had a positive outcome, and 73.7 percent of them indicated that they had initiated it. The fourth subgroup of presidents were asked to identify the most important incident with negative consequences. Only 14.3 percent reported that it had been initiated by the president, and 85.7 percent reported that it had come from some other source either internal or external to the campus.

This third set of data makes several things clear. First, presidents are likely to see themselves as the source of the most important changes on campus. Second, presidents are more likely to see and remember changes that had positive outcomes and less likely to see changes that had negative outcomes. And third, presidents see their activities as having primarily positive outcomes; when major events have negative outcomes, presidents attribute the cause of these events as persons other than themselves. There seems to be clear evidence of a "success bias" (March, 1982) that leads these successful people to believe that they have been personally responsible for successful outcomes. They are also able to view their worlds in ways that permit them to disassociate themselves from failure, and thus to foreclose disconfirming evidence that might correct erroneous learning.

EXPLAINING THE RESULTS

This paper has presented three sets of data describing presidential perceptions of campus leadership, of campus quality, and of campus change. How are these data related, and what concepts might permit us to integrate them into a coherent view that illuminates the presidential role?

Three possible explanations will be considered. First, that the reported presidential perceptions of low predecessor effectiveness may reflect reality to a greater extent than previously intimated. Second, that the presidential perceptions may be distorted by egocentric or motivational factors. And third, that the presidential perceptions may be distorted by cognitive biases. Although the first two possibilities cannot be lightly dismissed, they will be mentioned only briefly; the principal task of this paper is to explore the third alternative in greater detail.

Factual Bases for Presidential Perceptions

The data show that presidents almost uniformly consider themselves as more effective than their predecessor. The possibility of the consistent and systematic replacement of weaker presidents by stronger ones is objectively unsupportable if the level of presidential effectiveness is consistent during a term of office. It is possible, however, that on average presidential effectiveness may decline - or at least appear to decline - as their terms of office lengthen. There are at least two well-known ideas about how this can happen.

First, some presidents who initially appear effective may later after an extended period of service seem less so. The initial excitement of a successful presidential search may lead to undue optimism and unrealistically high expectations. By comparison, the demonstration of average or even above-average performance may be disappointing. Given the nature of presidential search processes this postdecision surprise (Harrison and March, 1984) should be quite common, and in some cases it should lead to dismissal by their boards. Indeed, a number of respondents supported their low rating of their predecessor by indicating that the previous president had been fired. To the extent that being fired can be objectively considered a valid measure of ineffectiveness, the negative evaluation by the current president may have a factual basis. Of course, it can be safely assumed that some of the respondents who gave themselves high ratings today will be fired tomorrow for the same reasons. If presidential firings occur at a constant level, the average effectiveness of incumbent presidents will remain stable, but a steady stream of new presidents will have objective evidence of their comparative superiority to their predecessor.

Second, there may be patterns of declining presidential effectiveness that are related to either internal psychological factors or to external demands upon institutional leaders. Some effective presidents may become less so as they become burned out and discouraged, or as they approach retirement. Evidence for this possibility is offered by a number of respondents who rated their predecessor twice, for example putting them at 90 based upon their first eight years, but

only at 20 based upon their last three. Other presidents may have been effective in responding to specific campus issues at the time they began their term (for example, in calming campus unrest), but then had become less effective as environmental constraints changed to require skills in other areas, such as finance, in which they were no longer expert. New presidents chosen in great measure because of their ability to respond to these emerging demands may in fact temporarily be more effective than the presidents they replaced. But then, as a matter of course, their effectiveness may also diminish as the environment changes to again require different skills. Still others may have inadvertently established administrative systems that isolated them and inhibited the degree to which they had access to important campus and environmental information. In the first case, the president wouldn't be able to do what was required to remain effective; in the second the president wouldn't know what was required. In either case, less effective presidents might cause a gradual loss of quality in various aspects of institutional functioning - lapses of performance that could be identified and corrected by a successor.

Such histories might correctly lead some presidents to see their predecessors as ineffective at the time they left office, without having any effect upon the average level of presidential effectiveness. Whether these factors operate at a level that would produce the outcomes seen in this study is an empirical question which cannot be answered without further research.

Egocentric and Motivational Bias

An alternative explanation that could plausibly account for these findings might be that presidential judgments are distorted by motivational factors. For example, people in general - not just college presidents - are more likely to give themselves credit for positive outcomes, and to blame themselves less for failures than objective assessments indicate (Ross and Anderson, 1982). From a psychological perspective it is easy to accept an ordinary egocentric bias in the perceptions of a president, and to postulate ordinary needs for self-esteem or normal human defense mechanisms as forces that could lead presidents to overestimate their level of campus influence. The finding that self-evaluations are usually higher than evaluations by external observers is commonplace in many settings (see for example the discussion of the aggrandizement effect in Caplow, 1964). Finding this same human tendency among college presidents, whose egos are probably stronger than those of most people, should hardly be surprising.

This bias might lead presidents not only to overestimate their effectiveness, but to overestimate their local campus's quality as well. Presidential success is often seen as part and parcel of institutional effectiveness. Because it is easier to believe the one if the other is evident or at least arguable, presidents may have reason to be optimists and boosters. And boosterism is an expected presidential stance. Presidents are supposed to find ways of maximizing the public images of their campuses, and their perceptions of the success of their institutions and of themselves therefore may be distorted somewhat by

wishful thinking. The period between 1983 and 1985, saw three major critiques of the "crisis" in higher education. During this same period, presidents surveyed overwhelming said (as they had two years earlier) that their institutions had recently gained ground in terms of academic strength, financial condition, and student services. And although almost every authoritative observer projected enrollment declines with consequent distress for many institutions, these same presidents by an even greater margin predicted increased gains in all three areas during the next five years! (Minter and Bowen, 1982; Chronicle of Higher Education, 1984). These previous findings are fully confirmed in the data just reported which were gathered in late 1985 and early 1986.

Egocentric bias may thus indeed account in part for the high self-assessments of presidents, as well as for their nearly uniform belief in significant institutional improvement during their tenure. But it is far from clear how egocentrism might account for the great deficiencies reported for one's predecessor and in prior institutional performance. To boost one's self does not automatically require one to decry the past, or to evaluate one's predecessor as below average.

Cognitive Biases

The arguments just presented are plausible and familiar. A third interpretation exists that has greater novelty. It examines these same data through a cognitive lens that considers how presidents make judgments and learn under conditions of uncertainty. These cognitive explanations not only offer a different way of considering how administrative learning takes place, but they also challenge commonly

accepted notions of leadership. Two specific cognitive influences will be considered - the effects of judgmental hueristics, and the processes of presidential sense-making.

Judgmental Hueristics. The making of judgments in organizational settings is complex. Information is limited, the number of potential interactions is large, and the cognitive requirements for complete rationality exceed human capacity. Decisionmakers commonly simplify the required operations through the application of hueristics - that is, shortcuts or rules of thumb - that assist in the making of probabilistic judgments under conditions of uncertainty. These principles are the tools of the intuitive scientist, and they usually serve us well by enabling us to generalize, to make judgments, to do things that we in any case have to do with some equanimity and sense of control , and otherwise to function in an equivocal environment. But they can also be misleading, and in certain types of situations they can cause us systematically to make errors.

One pattern that may cause inaccurate judgments of this kind is known as the availability heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman, 1982). The availability heuristic leads people to make judgments of frequency, probability, or causal relationship based upon the ease with which examples can be imagined or brought to mind and are therefore cognitively "available" (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). This heuristic can often be helpful, and a president attempting to predict whether a new policy initiative will be successful will often be well guided by bringing to mind the outcomes of previous initiatives. However, the

president might also be misled by this heuristic if some previous policy initiatives were more easily remembered than others, and research has indicated that certain biases of this kind are predictable. For example, salience and vividness affect recall. A campus initiative that resulted in major press coverage and notoriety would be more quickly come to mind than a similar program that was marked only by a brief, in-house memorandum. Presidents also might more readily recall past policies with which they were personally involved and less likely to remember those in which they had little part.

Cognitive factors may lead presidents to overestimate their influence because they have given more time to their own ideas than to those of others, because their own ideas fit more easily into their own perceptual schemas, and because they know more about their own ideas than those of other participants (Ross and Sicoly, 1982) . Each of these factors increases the ready access of the President's own ideas, and the availability heuristic suggests that the ease of recall will result in an enhanced sense of influence and responsibility.

Availability can also be affected by expectations. The concept of "knowledge structures" refers to the systems of "beliefs, theories, propositions, and schemas" (Nisbett and Ross, 1980, p. 7) through which we perceive and process information. We can develop "scripts" that describe expected sequences of causal behavior and that make events more predictable and understandable. Simplifying the real world is essential if we are to function, but at the same time unconsciously relying on such scripts leads to "the possibility of erroneous interpretation,

inaccurate expectations, and inflexible modes of response" (Nesbitt and Ross, 1980, p.35). Through experience and through expert opinion, presidents come to believe that attention should be paid to some matters and not to others, to hold certain expectations about cause and effect, and therefore to consider some outcomes more probable than others. In the absence of unambiguous indicators of performance, presidents may rely upon these available and coherent scenarios. Presidents can then selectively confirm their influence by noticing the organizational processes that occur subsequent to their actions, focusing principally upon those positive outcomes that could plausably be related to their actions, and then with a clear conscience attributing these outcomes to their own behavior. Here selection, not egotism, becomes the explanation for self-centered judgments of presidential responsibilty.

Presidential Sense-Making. Weick (1979) has argued that the primary function of organizations is "sense-making," that is, a process through which organizational participants, faced with an equivocal environment, develop through their interactions a set of mutually acceptable ideas and beliefs about what is real, what is important, and how to respond. These shared perceptions constitute reality for the organization and help participants to interpret their experiences. In this view, a university is only an interrelated system of ideas, and an organization exists in important part for the purpose of facilitating cognitive consensus among participants.

The former president has occupied a major role in this sense-making process, and has internalized the norms and values of the institution.

But for the new president, whose sense of reality was formed in another institutional setting, understandings, processes, and cognitive orientations of the new setting may appear irrational -- that is, they cannot and do not make "sense." Simple matters, such as the way data are collected and analyzed, meetings are conducted, or personnel actions are processed, may seem bizarre and incomprehensible -- not merely different, but wrong. New presidents encountering this culture shock may talk off the record to colleagues at other institutions and, understandably, complain (but with a certain degree of pride) "you wouldn't believe the mess I found when I got there, but I've finally begun to get it turned around." They are as likely to attribute these perceived institutional failings to the faults of their predecessor as they are to attribute institutional improvement to their own leadership capabilities.

Differences in the programmatic orientations and styles of successive presidents may to some extent contribute to these cognitive discontinuities. Riesman (1986), for example, has commented on the tendency for some presidential search committees to look explicitly for candidates who are quite different from the incumbent. And unreported data from the present study suggest that presidents differ considerably in the extent to which they report their personal leadership style as stressing bureaucratic, collegial, political, or symbolic elements. A managerially-oriented president appointed to respond to budgetary problems might consider the collegial orientation of a predecessor as a symptom of weakness in making tough decisions, just as a

faculty-oriented president appointed to develop stronger academic programs might see the activities of a bureaucratic predecessor as a failure to understand the essential nature of academic institutions. In both cases, the sensible behaviors of one president operating within one consistent knowledge structure might appear nonsensical to a successor operating in another.

When presidents say that their predecessors were less competent than they, and their institutions were less effective but are now much improved, what presidents may often mean is that they literally couldn't make "sense" of the institution when they arrived, but now they can. Certainly presidents can influence the directions of institutions. But it is consistent with the characteristic stability of institutions over time to believe that the improved congruence between institutional functioning and presidential perceptions are due at least as much to the growing sense-making capabilities of the president as to any significant alterations in basic institutional processes.

DISCUSSION

Presidents build schemas of effectiveness that are based upon previous success in their careers and upon the normative expectation that presidents have critical effects on institutional life. When they encounter new and ambiguous situations they are likely to anticipate, and therefore to observe, successful outcomes, and to attribute these to their own efforts. When outcomes are not successful, they are likely to

consider them as a result of factors outside their control and are thereby able to discount the disconfirming data.

We are all subject in some measure to errors induced by cognitive distortion. That is true not only for college presidents, but also for those who study college presidents. We can argue that our scholarly skills and detachment identify us more as formal scientists than as intuitive scientists, but we might have a difficult time supporting that assertion with evidence. When drawing conclusions about presidents and leadership, are we not subject to the distortions of the availability heuristic just as presidents are?

Through socialization, training, and the development of knowledge structures, those who study presidents are likely to believe in the importance of the presidency and the efficacy of presidential behavior. These "enduring cognitive structures such as beliefs and values foster preconceptions that heighten the availability of certain evidence, thus biasing the judgment process.... Expecting that a person will engage in a particular behavior can lead to inferences that a person has engaged in the behavior" (Taylor, 1982, p.192, 197). Preconceptions affect what is seen, what is not seen, and what is invented. Particularly with equivocal data, preconceptions influence how we select and weigh data, resulting in a greater likelihood of self-confirmation (Ross and Lepper, 1980; Jennings, Amabile, and Ross, 1982). Expectancy bias can mislead us into seeing presidential influence even when it does not exist - or into failing to see it when it does. In general, our theories can overwhelm our data (Nesbitt and Ross, 1980) unless we are careful.

Those aspects of the environment that are, or that can be made to appear, more salient, are more "available." They are often given more attention and added weight in making attributions of cause and effect (Nesbitt and Ross, 1980; Ross and Anderson, 1982; Taylor, 1982). Because Presidents are more visible than most other members of the campus community, we are likely through the availability heuristic to assign them disproportionate responsibility for outcomes, even when it is not objectively warranted.

The same principles that affect the judgments of presidents, and of those who study presidents, works for others on campus as well. Those who have frequent opportunity to work with the president, or to hear or read about the president, may also be misled into overestimating presidential responsibility for institutional outcomes. They may then act in a manner that seems to confirm the president's false estimation. This explanation provides an interesting way of considering how others may help presidents come to erroneously perceive responsibility for campus outcomes; the president's activities are more visible, salient, and therefore available to them than are the behaviors of others.

More effective learning by both presidents and by presidential observers depends upon being able to create models that allow us to understand the relationship between presidential activities and organizational consequences. At present we do not have such models. We are perhaps able to historically reconstruct instances of effectiveness on a post-hoc basis, but this is both conceptually and practically quite different than being able to specify prospectively what effective

presidential behavior would be in a specific situation. Almost without exception, our advice to presidents, when examined closely, is not much more substantive than to "act effectively."

In the absence of such knowledge, presidential leadership may be as much a product of social attributions as a set of desirable behaviors. By creating roles that we declare will provide leadership to an organization, we construct the attribution that organizational effects are due to leadership behavior (Pfeffer, 1977). This allows us to simplify and make sense of complex organizational processes that would otherwise be impossible to comprehend (Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich, 1985). It is perhaps as sensible to say that successful organizational events "cause" effective presidents as it is to say that effective presidents "cause" successful events.

This thought need in no way diminish the importance of the presidential role. Presidents do serve as a focus for institutional performance and they do make the organization appear to its participants to be stable and predictable (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). They can give participants a sense of purpose and aid in the development of new and exciting myths.

The effect of a president who does the right things may be difficult to discern, but the effect of a president who does the wrong things may be immediate and obvious. This means that presidential behavior does often make a difference (even though it may be not be as often as either presidents or observers think). Belief in presidential effectiveness

has the virtue of encouraging presidents to initiate and persist in potentially effective behavior. As long as presidential initiative is not dysfunctional, in the long run it may be better to encourage it by overassessing its benefits even when we feel rather doubtful about the probabilities of its being effective.

But at the same time, recognizing the significant limits to presidential leadership as commonly defined may be also personally and organizationally useful. It may reduce the unrealistic aspirations of presidents and their constituencies. It may release the president from some of the anxieties and concerns that are generated by a belief that every decision and action is of critical importance. It may relieve the president of the burden of constant comparison with the stereotype of the heroic leader, and the feelings of frustration that come from unfulfilled expectations. And it may help some who observe presidents to become more modest in their criticisms of presidential leadership and institutional effectiveness.

REFERENCES

Caplow, T. Principles of Organization. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964.

Chronicle of Higher Education. "College Presidents' Views on Trends and Issues on Their Campuses". Chronicle of Higher Education. November 21, 1984, p. 14.

Cohen, M. D. and March, J. G. Leadership and Ambiguity. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

Harrison, J. R. and March, J. G. "Decision Making and Postdecision Surprises." Administrative Science Quarterly. 1984, 29, 26-42.

Jennings, D. L., Amabile, T. M., and Ross, L. "Informal Covariation Assessment: Data-Based Versus Theory-Based Judgments." In D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (Eds.), Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

March, J. G. "Emerging Developments in the Study of Organizations." Review of Higher Education. 1982, 6, 1-18.

March, J. G. and Olsen, J. P. Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations, Second Edition. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1979.

Meindl, J. R., Ehrlich, S. B., and Dukerich, J. M. "The Romance of Leadership." Administrative Science Quarterly. 1985, 30, 78-102.

Minter, W. J. and Bowen, H. R. "Assessing Their Institutions, College presidents Express 'Extraordinarily High' Levels of Confidence." Chronicle of Higher Education, May 26, 1982, pp. 8, 10.

Nisbett, R. and Ross, L. Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980.

Pfeffer, J. "The Ambiguity of Leadership." Academy of Management Review. 1977, 2, 104-119.

Pfeffer, J. and Salancik, G. R. The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

Riesman, D. Personal Correspondence. January 16, 1986.

Ross, L. and Anderson, C. A. "Shortcomings in the Attribution Process: On the Origins and Maintenance of Erroneous Social Assessments." In D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (Eds.), Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Ross, L. and Lepper, M. R. "The Perserverance of Beliefs: Empirical and Normative Considerations." In A. Shweder (Ed.), Fallible Judgment in Behavioral Research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980.

Ross, M. and Sicoly, F. "Egocentric Biases in Availability and Attribution." In D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (Eds.), Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Taylor, S. E. "The Availability Bias in Social Perception and Interaction." In D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (Eds.), Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Tversky, A. and Kahneman, D. "Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases." In D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (Eds.), Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Weick, K. E. "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems." Administrative Science Quarterly. 1976, 21, 1-19.

Weick, K. E. The Social Psychology of Organizing, Second Edition. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1978.